Right Plant, Right Place

Your landscape is alive! We often forget that plants need time and space to grow and live. Think of the confusion occurring in your yard as you trim and manicure your landscape, but then tell it to grow and be green with fertilizer. This can lead to a stressed landscape, and owner!

A well designed landscape allows plants the space to grow and mature. Katie Giacalone, Carolina Clear Extension Associate, Clemson Extension

Is nature ours to control or are we better off treating it as a partner? Is that beautiful plant you brought back from vacation going to work for you or will you have to work for it? You may soon notice that this plant is growing much faster than the others in your yard. It could be that it does not normally grow in this part of the world, so it does not have any of its natural forces (think insect pests, diseases and weather) to keep it in check. Is it growing so fast that it is invading your landscape and out-competing native plants for nutrients, light and water? Has it now crowded your plant bed so much that air circulation is limited, creating a perfect environment for insect and disease problems? But, it looked so good when you got it, right? So, how did this happen? Of course you were not intending for this plant to cause such problems, you just thought the beautiful fall flowers would be a great addition to your landscape. We often forget about the importance of getting to know the plants that we choose for our yards and the site conditions where we expect them to grow. All plants have different characteristics and will behave differently depending upon where they grow. Not only do plants like to live in the region that they are used to, but they will also grow well in similar sites with the conditions to which they have adapted. For example, a dune flower may not tolerate growing in the mountains, and a shade-loving plant is not going to thrive in a sunny spot of the yard.

How do you determine suitable conditions? Start by identifying your region and understand the broad conditions (climate, soil structure, slopes, wildlife, etc.) typical to this area. Use this information to start to narrow down what is going on in your yard, such as the amount of sunlight and typical soil moisture. Perform a soil test to find out specifically which nutrients are in your soil. You may be surprised to find that nutrients are already there, but perhaps less available to plants. The soil test report will provide recommendations for how to make nutrients more available for what you are trying to grow. This way, you can fertilize and lime accordingly, which is not only good for plants, but also keeps excess fertilizer from polluting our waterways.
Carolina Yards Planting Regions (adapted from Donna Bowen). Be sure to choose plants that are adapted to your region of the state.
Sara Pachota, Consumer Horticulture Extension Agent, Clemson Extension

Next, take inventory of the physical features and environments within your yard. Make note of things you are noticing with maps and lists. Figure out what landscape features you want, and see if you can find a suitable place for them on your map. For example, you may have found a low lying place that may be appropriate for a rain garden or a sunny lawn area that you can replace with a butterfly garden. You may be surprised at what your map will unveil.

Find a plant that is right for your region and your yard, then plan for its life cycle. Find out how big it will be, how fast it will grow, what the branching structure is, if it will lose its leaves, does it support wildlife, and any other characteristics that may have an impact on your yard. Use the Carolina Yards Plant Database www.clemson.edu/cy/plants) to perform a custom plant search.

Now go a step further and see what connections exist within your yard. Is your hedge creating a border, feeding the birds, and fencing out deer? We often plant vegetation to serve one purpose, such as locating a tree for shade. Find ways to have plants serve multiple functions, such as nectar for butterflies, fruit for wildlife or winter shelter for birds. The more connections that exist within your yard the more ecological it can be. Think of a spider web, the woven silk creates a strong house for the spider, but also allows a better chance for the spider to catch dinner. Try to connect as many dots in your yard as possible.

Create connections in your landscape by allowing plants to serve multiple functions. This beautiful Asclepias tuberosa in bloom also provides nectar for butterflies.
Sara Pachota, Consumer Horticulture Extension Agent, Clemson Extension

And remember to take advantage of nature’s recycling process by allowing a plant’s organic material to fall and break down in the yard there by creating a compost layer. This will help to build healthy soils that support these healthy plants and the functions they serve.

- To learn more about maintaining a healthy, environmentally friendly landscape, visit the Carolina Yards website, www.clemson.edu/cy
- Search for low maintenance, low impact plants suitable to your South Carolina yard using the Carolina Yards Plant Database, www.clemson.edu/cy/plants
- Help teach others in your community to achieve healthy gardens by participating in the Master Gardener Training Program, www.clemson.edu/mg
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